

*The UK boutique & department
store fashion & accessory guide plus
retail buyer directory.*

A step by step guide showing how to have
your fashion products stocked by the most
influential fashion & lifestyle buyers in the
UK.

By
Renato Grant



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Plus buyer directory.**

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**The ultimate step by step guide
Featuring over 400 full buyer contact details!
How to target, approach and secure orders from
Premier fashion & lifestyle retailers**

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Biography.

Here's my story. As a 19 year old teenager I needed a job! I applied for a warehouse position at a fashion company in London. I got the job! I thought I got the job due to my charm & skills, in later years I learned I only got the job because a young lady employee, who noticed me being interviewed, liked my afro hairstyle! So much for my style & presence!

One day, whilst humping a dirty dusty 20kg roll of fabric on my shoulders through the plush showroom, I noticed a guy sitting around a table, drinking wine talking to a very attractive young lady. I asked a colleague what he was doing, I was told he was presenting a buyer the collection, his job was showroom fashion sales. From that moment I decided that was where I should & would be!

Having zero sales experience I managed to blag an interview for sales staff with another fashion house. In that interview I was asked by the owner to hold up one of his designs and sell it to him! I waffled on and on, talking complete rubbish, until he laughed and said enough!

He looked me dead in the eye and told me I knew nothing! I got the job! He decided that if I was young, foolish & cocksure enough to try to blag him then he could easily fine tune me into a knowledgeable fashion salesman once I had learnt the ropes. He started me off selling one pound t-shirts in their hundreds to boutiques & department stores. At that point I said to myself, let's see how high I can take this!

That was with a fashion house called Jeffrey Rogers back in 1986. Years later I was wholesaling 2000 pound couture dresses, by Maria Grachvogel, to Harvey Nichols & Harrods which were being worn by Saudi Princesses! I was being taken to London Fashion Week, New York Fashion Week and Paris Fashion Week by Sara Sturgeon, I had arrived...so I thought! Fashion sales are anything but glamorous! It is demanding & stressful but can be extremely rewarding.

I have worked in the UK fashion industry as a Sales Manager & Sales Director, for 24 years. I started when I was 19, I am now 45. I have worked with many global fashion designers & brands, including Alannah Hill, Ginger & Smart, Maria Grachvogel, Sara Sturgeon, Exte, Roberto Cavalli, Dolce & Gabbana and Versace jeans couture. My agency, Hemisphere, now represents established designers from all over the world wishing to develop a UK retail client base. I also consult for & with many designers.

With the above mentioned designers I have supplied literally hundreds of top end boutiques and department stores in the UK and Ireland as well as premier stores, throughout Europe, the Far East and the US. I have exhibited at London; Paris, Las Vegas & NY fashion weeks and have sold consistently for 20 of my 24 years in the industry.

Prior to my sales experience I had to learn the ropes so to speak starting in the warehouse, production, sampling & design rooms through to cmt factories to see how everything came together.

In 2002 I launched Hemisphere Associates representing top end women's wear fashion & accessory designers. Today, in 2010, I am still selling and so the story continues...

Introduction.

I have known many of today's popular & iconic fashion brands that started selling their products on market stalls. They aspired to having their products sold through premier retailers and they went for it. Some succeeded where others failed. The difference was all in the approach to buyers & PR.

Regardless of whether you are new to the fashion business, a graduate or student of fashion, perhaps thinking of starting your own label, or an established designer seeking to expand into the UK, this invaluable guide will give you a hand's on practical insight into what to do and what not to do in order to successfully sell to fashion, lifestyle & accessory buyers throughout the UK.

It is written in very simplistic, easily understandable terms, as I tend to write as I speak!

Sales is perhaps one of the most under represented & unspoken of areas within fashion yet without sales everything else becomes redundant. A beautiful collection will become merely a beautiful collection of samples if no orders are secured. A catwalk, a photoshoot, a PR campaign without retailers stocking the merchandise becomes meaningless.

I have included everything that I have learned on my journey with a view to helping you to sell your merchandise to the same quality boutiques and department stores that I do. Everything in this book relates to fashion sales within the wholesale environment.

If you are reading this e-book, which contains full details of over 400 of the best UK retailers and e-tailers in the industry, then you are serious about selling your label/brand into one of the strongest and most influential fashion markets in the world, the UK.

You have a major head start on the competition as I have done the legwork for you. You now have the very best stores to target via my 400 plus UK buyer directory contained at the rear of this e-book.

So here it is. This is what we do, as sales people in the fashion industry, in order to get our collections stocked by the very best retailers and e-tailers in the UK fashion industry.

Attracting orders

To get your first stockist(s) you have to work pretty hard! If you're an overseas designer, you must try to work in conjunction with your Embassy here in London and do as many 'sponsored' trade exhibitions as you can alongside them. They have access to more areas within the industry than you do at the moment. You must try to showcase your collections at trade shows. Buyers love meeting the designer and will feel privileged if presented the collection by the designer. Sales people then take over at writing the order stage!

Buyers like the collection presented by designers but prefer the speed of salespeople writing the orders because then they can say certain things in honesty (maybe pricing/styling/colour ways not too their liking etc) that they would not dream of saying to the designer, so as the designer you must know when to take a backseat! It also allows the buyer(s) to relax in the knowledge that salespeople are thicker skinned than the designers themselves!

If exhibitions are difficult for whatever reasons, then you must either mail the buyer your fantastic images, look book, or better still, go see the buyer at their store, or send them press cuttings you may have.

When planning to 'drop in' on a boutique, always call and ask first. Just say that you're in the area for an hour and would it be okay to show a few of your designs which will probably take half an hour. If the buyer likes what she/he sees then you could be there a lot longer but it will be at their discretion. If they do not like what they see or it's not for them, you'll be in and out in under 15 minutes.

With regards to mailing the buyers, do not send them information that is too bulky or longwinded. It will get thrown away, why? Because they get sent too much from too many designers! Yours has to stand out!

Design something that is small, concise, shows images of your best pieces and has just enough explanation of the collection on it to excite a buyer. If you have press on your collection you could include this in your mail out. Personally, I design a postcard C5 or Half A4 size. On this I include beautiful imagery on the front and concise information on the reverse. (See your info pack, I have included one)

This works well because it tells buyers which designers I am carrying for the season with imagery, gives a little background on the back and tells them where I am showing from and for how long. When it is delivered it is not in an envelope so the likely hood is that it will get seen and if buyers like what they see on the front they will read what is on the back! They then usually take this postcard when they are out on buying appointments because it is lightweight and small enough to fit in a handbag.

When I do my mail outs I make sure that they arrive either on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday morning. Why? Because it's midweek, stores are usually quieter and buyers have more time to browse their mail! Also Monday's are when department store buyers do figures so never a good time for mail or calls and Fridays get busier in the lead up to the weekend. When I am making my follow up phone calls I call late morning after 11 am but before 3pm the same for the same reasons!

No point calling a buyer late afternoon, either they would have left, be on other appointments or more than likely they have customers in the store and will not take your call!

Buyers do not mind if you are prepared to take a small capsule collection to them but you must make sure to tell them it is a small capsule collection. They will not be too happy if you turn up with a 100 piece collection. They need the space to sell goods in store. If you call and ask if it will be okay to pop in and show a few pieces next time you are around, the likelihood is that they will say fine. This is a very good way of taking initial orders. It will cost the buyer nothing other than a small amount of time but show great enthusiasm on your part. I have done this many times and still do it today if there is no other way. I prefer showroom sales because I will have the full attention of my buyers but if I really want a store to buy my collections and they cannot get to me for any reason then I will go to them with collection and order book in hand.

There is also no reason you cannot approach UK fashion editors directly also with the view to having an article done on you for UK magazines. UK press typically want great images sent to them initially. If they like what they see they will take it a step further with you. Simply go and buy the top UK Magazines, Vogue, Grazia, Stella, Marie Claire etc, find the page that lists all fashion editors/ assistants and make contact. It is a very big money saver for you and you will be doing a similar job Pr's will do initially but charge you a lot of money.

Magazines do call off samples if they feel it may fit an article they have or shoot they have and you will have to make the samples readily available however introducing yourselves directly as in house PR's is a great money saver at the outset. It is similar in approaching buyers in that you must send them imagery, press releases etc, but if they love what you are doing & feature or use your clothes in a spread shoot, and this is priceless exposure and fantastic brand building.

UK boutique buyers travel globally in order to search out designers & lifestyle products for their boutiques, everything from fashion & accessories to scented candles, furniture and art. As well as stocking the big established designers they love finding a new designer not stocked by many. Do not give exclusivity unless you have a very good geographic understanding of the UK. I allow a 15 mile radius between boutiques for exclusivity. That does not work in major cities. In London for example I may have 4 or 5 stockists all within a 10 mile radius. This is acceptable if the collection is popular with buyers but be careful!

If the collection is popular and strong then you cannot limit yourself to one stockist per area. You will never grow this way and buyers being buyers will always try to push for exclusivity! You must weigh up a few things. The store themselves and the size of order. If a particular boutique has placed a reasonably sized order and booked through the collection which will

give you a greater exposure of the entire collection within their store then you must support this stockist, offer the possibility of exclusivity for the following season but be prepared to send as much point of sale material out with the order as you can get together.

Make show cards & look books available, this will go a long way with the buyer and show that you are not merely trying to take an order but are also prepared to promote your goods in their store.

Buyers do not have great loyalty anymore and if the goods do not sell they will move on so you must be prepared to move on also. If the goods do sell well and they come back the following season with a larger order, now you can talk about exclusivity.

If you find yourself in a situation like I have where I had to choose between Browns Focus and Selfridges, then you must weigh up all odds. Remember Department stores have even less loyalty and they also now ask for large discount terms, which they call settlement terms, in order just to deal with them! They also tend to leave your merchandise hanging on a rail with no specific salesperson to sell it! This is why I tend to support boutique business. They have a much more personalised approach, will help the consumer to any extent and will support the designer more so going forward. Department store business I see as a bonus, independent boutique business is the way forward.

Of course larger orders come from the department stores but if you fail to have a good sell through for no reason of your own then you may have messed up your chances of supplying smaller boutiques closer to the department store at the outset. Do not be blinded by wanting to be stocked primarily in the Likes of Selfridges or Harvey Nichols. These department store buyers also check out the boutiques for fresh talent! They will always visit stores like KJ's Laundry, Austique, Browns, The Cross and Anna (all on my database) because they know these boutique buyers actively seek out smaller designers & labels.

Target a small number of retailers initially but mail out to everyone. The best stores are all on my database. Do exhibitions if that is available to you. This is the best way of taking initial orders. Here is where the mail out you do becomes invaluable so it must be effective & you must ensure it gets read.

Send press imagery on your collection. Do all of this in house before approaching UK agents or distributors. Press will be more interested in your collection if you can name drop a London Stockist. Always mail out to Department stores but do not pin your hopes for orders here initially.

Have a small number of boutiques that you will follow up with, say 30 -40 and make your calls to these stores. These are the ones you really would like your collection stocked in so pursue them. Go to see them. Send them imagery. Call them and nurture them. Eventually they will agree to you going to show them your merchandise. Once in the store your only goal is to come out with an order.

Lastly, never talk about minimum orders to a buyer even though they will ask. Always be vague! Always say to them, 'We don't actually have a minimum order, although we really can't ship out less than 30 pieces'. This will keep them interested. 30 pieces to a buyer represents a

small order & will not break their bank, they don't know our wholesale prices exactly as of yet, so to us this could be a nice size order in value terms. Buyers never usually stick to their budgets anyway. If they love something, they always find budget for it and always end up buying more than the initial 30 piece minimum we asked for!

Getting Invoices Paid !

No point in us talking orders if we don't get paid by our boutiques & department stores!

One of the most important things to remember here is always have your buyers sign your order sheets which MUST and I stress MUST have UK terms & conditions printed on the back. I have provided you fully certified & legalised T&C's on page 18.

Always use the trade reference form on p.19 to send out to two trade reference the give you.

Most orders written are usually on industry standard payment terms which are 30 days net or 5% 7 days. This means if the store pays you within 7 days of invoice then you grant them a curtsey 5% discount for prompt payment. This does not relate to department store business. They have their own settlement terms which will vary from store to store but expect settlement terms to range anywhere between 10 and 15%. This means you have to be careful when doing business with the department stores. You must know beforehand their settlement terms. Don't be afraid to ask the buyer these terms as she is looking through your collection. She will expect to be asked. Their terms are always on their purchase orders they provide when confirming an order with you.

Most stores, including department stores, take longer than the agreed 30 days to pay. In today's economy it's just the way it is. Cash flow is tight for everyone, so expect more realistic terms of payment to be anywhere between 45 - 60 days.

You will only get paid if you chase your invoice. Chase a few days prior to it becoming due so everyone can get the necessary documentation together. Buyers often misplace invoices, have incorrect bank details to send payment to, send out cheques when they should pay by telegraphic transfer etc etc so it is always wise to pre-empt these queries.

Prior to the invoice becoming due for payment, do all you can within your power and budget to help the store sell your merchandise! Sell through is king and if your sell through is high come the day the invoice is due, the buyer will know and you will get paid. If your sell through is low come invoice due date, they will stall but this stalling will greatly depend upon what efforts you have made to assist sales. This is where PR and creating the hype really does help. It helps to drive customers both to their store and more importantly, toward your product within their store. (see P.15 for creating hype)

If buyers see this happening, even if your sell through is relatively low, come invoice due date, you will find you will get paid sooner rather than later.

Regarding using a factoring company. I personally have used them once and vowed never to use them again! The reason, well they pay your invoice upfront sure enough, albeit for a fat commission, however their main interest is in getting paid themselves via the store you supplied and they will use any method to ensure they do so. The effect this has on buyers is that it upsets them greatly when constantly hassled and even threatened. This in turn leads to the buyer not buying from you again in order to avoid this, so a word of warning here. By all means use a factoring company but ensure you know whom they represent first and what their policy is for chasing and recovering debt. It may be prudent to pay a little more in commission to them if they use a softer approach when chasing your retailer. Last thing you want is to lose a stockist based on how a factor speaks to them about money!

The UK Buyer Directory

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